

Emma Spaulding Bryant: Civil War Bride, Carpetbagger's Wife, Ardent Feminist: Letters and Diaries, 1860-1900

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Review

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Currie, Ruth Douglas *Emma Spaulding Bryant: Civil War Bride, Carpetbagger's Wife, Ardent Feminist: Letters and Diaries, 1860-1900.* Fordham University Press, \$75.00 ISBN 082322273X

Reconstructing female identity

Marriage wed Antebellum ideals and independence

Emma Spaulding Bryant: Civil War Bride, Carpetbagger's Wife, Ardent Feminist: Letters and Diaries, 1860-1900 provides valuable insight into the ways northern women rebuilt their lives and their identities in the post-Civil War South. Edited by Ruth Douglas Currie, this new volume brings together correspondence, diaries, memoirs and published documents held in archives and private collections to tell the story of one northern woman's difficult journey from adversity to activism.

Born in the small farming village of Buckfield, Maine, on February 16, 1844, Emma Frances Spaulding was the fourth child of Cynthia Bray Spaulding and James Spaulding, a prominent town official. Emma's great-grandfather had been one of the first settlers in the region, and Emma enjoyed the material and social benefits of membership in one of Buckfield's leading families. At sixteen Emma met John Emory Bryant, a passionate, self-righteous teacher who boarded with the Spauldings and acted as Emma's "surrogate parent and guide." When the Civil War compelled "brother John" to leave the schoolroom for the battlefield, Emma agreed to correspond with him from Maine Wesleyan Seminary and Female College at Kents Hill. As she completed her studies in literature, languages, mathematics and painting, Emma looked longingly for John's letters written in military camps across South Carolina and Georgia. His homecoming, in June 1864, marked the beginning of their married life together. After leaving the army in September 1864, John spent a few short months reading law before embarking on a new career as an agent for the Freedman's Bureau in Augusta, Georgia.

Emma Spaulding Bryant's journey south marked a turning point in her life. As her husband waged his lifelong yet largely unsuccessful campaign to convert "southern whites to American ideas," Emma struggled to carve out a domestic haven in a hostile and unfamiliar world. John's grand vision for the South kept his focus on the political landscape. Abandoning his family for months at a time, John left Emma to take charge of the fragile domestic arrangements he left behind. Bereft of personal funds or a regular income, Emma had no time to reflect on her southern surroundings when bills remained unpaid and food and clothing were scarce. Instead of looking outward to a world turned upside down by war, Emma's papers essentially focus on the daily challenges that confronted her own family and household. With the birth of her daughter, Alice, in 1871, the Bryants' already tenuous financial plight worsened. Forced to rely on the kindness of landlords and shopkeepers as her husband chased his political pipedream, Emma soon realized that dependence was a luxury she could ill afford. "I am now entirely out of money," she wrote in a desperate yet regular plea to John for money, "with Drs. bill unpaid, washing bill unpaid and in need of things both for self, as the money that should have gone for those was necessarily devoted to other things."

Emma's struggle to marry antebellum conceptions of womanly dependence with harsh postwar realities is a compelling theme throughout this book. On the one hand, Emma aspired to a domestic ideal, where she could, like her southern neighbors, mark out her status by becoming a consummate housewife and mother. In her letters to John, she "experienced an earnest longing" for the day when they would have the means to acquire a "pleasant, tasteful home where we can enjoy refinement of association of things as well as people and where our daughter may grow up with objects about her by which her life may be enriched." This ideal rested on financial comfort--something that always eluded John and Emma Bryant. Instead, the hardships and turmoil of life in the defeated South produced a confronting reality for a woman who confessed she was "illy adapted" to lines of work outside "wifhood and motherhood and the general unpaid (in dollars and cents) work of the church and society." It was in her times of financial desperation, however, that Emma discovered a new sense of self. After another of John's reform efforts failed, Emma utilized her education and voluntary activities at a local school to become a teacher. "When I am out of the school room it seems an odd and an undesirable thing that at past forty I am beginning school teaching," she remarked in 1887, "but in the school room I fortunately feel it less and am able to enter heartily into the spirit of my work."

Emma's resolve transformed her into an active participant both within her marriage and her community. She still worried over finances, but her teaching and sewing furnished Emma with a newfound sense of independence, and provided her with practical skills that she later employed in her work with the Woman's Christian Temperance Union.

The Bryant correspondence also provides insight into Emma's emerging sense of autonomy as it subtly changed the intimate framework of her marriage. As Currie aptly notes, an absent John could hardly function as head of household, and it was Emma who was left to solve the problems of daily life such as "how to treat a sudden illness, when to call the doctor . . . even where she would live." Her control over domestic matters, and later, her financial contribution to the household, gave Emma the self-confidence to believe that she too had an important stake in family decisions. She agreed to be John's "true, loving wife," but reminded him that she was "equal [to him] in every and the fullest sense. . . Nothing less and nothing else." While she may have deplored her entrance into the field of gainful employment, it was paid work that expanded Emma's sphere of influence within her marriage, household and community. In the climate of postwar necessity, Emma was compelled to abandon dependence for self-sufficiency, and in doing so, embraced the spirit of reform that became the hallmark of northern women's contribution to late 19th century America.

The papers of Emma Spaulding Bryant, although interesting, suffer greatly from structural and editorial weaknesses. In her brief introduction, Currie has failed to place the Bryant papers in any theoretical context. Clearly, the papers address many key issues hotly debated by historians, but the ways in which these documents contribute to and provide new understandings of discussions on suffrage, temperance, or the watershed debate are overlooked. More explicit links between the individual story and the wider historical and historiographical landscape were needed. The absence of any methodological discussion is another key deficiency of this book, along with an inconsistent approach to editing. Many prominent politicians and activists, for example, were not appropriately cited. Further, the repetitive nature of much of the correspondence becomes a little tedious, and while some material is very interesting, many letters could have been edited out completely. Greater attention to the selection of documents would have improved this book considerably. Nevertheless, the papers of Emma Spaulding Bryant remind us that historical change is located within the complex life stories of individuals. Currie is to be congratulated for challenging us to think about how northern women rebuilt their identities in the postwar South.

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